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ABSTRACT

A comparison of the reading skills assessment programs at three community colleges in Virginia and New Jersey is presented as part of an examination of the kinds of placement decisions that are made from assessment test data. Introductory comments focus on the controversy surrounding the growing emphasis on skills assessment in open-door community college systems. Next, the three reading skills assessment programs are described in terms of their implementation, findings about students' skills levels, and placement policies. Finally, conclusions are presented, emphasizing: (1) the importance of skills assessment for translating the community college's open door policy into student retention and success; (2) specification of skills required in college level courses; (3) testing instruments that accurately and incrementally measure skills; (4) remedial curriculum staffed by faculty committed to developing these skills; (5) clearly stipulated performance goals and completion time frames set and monitored for students; (6) post-evaluations to determine when exit proficiency has been achieved; (7) regular interaction between students identified as being in need and faculty, advisors and counselors; and (8) financial support for administrative/faculty personnel, facilities, and monitoring systems for the program. (LAL)

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I.

ENTRANCE TESTING AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Historically, a certain number of college freshmen have always been unprepared for the college level curriculum. Colonial colleges, founded before there was any network of grammar schools, enrolled students with less than college level skills. Rudolph (1977:60) notes that "college authorities learned to restrain their expectations in deference to the preparation of the students who came their way." Special programs designed to help these students emerged in the nineteenth century. (Cross, 1976) By the late 1970s attention had again been drawn to the number of students ill-prepared for college. With minimal reading, writing and/or computational skills, an estimated 13% of high school seniors have been labeled functionally illiterate. (National Commission, 1983) As some of these students become matriculants in the nation's community colleges they do so with skills below "traditional" standards. Institutions, more and more frequently, are turning to academic skills assessment of entering students to place them in courses where they can be helped.

A transition to or increased emphasis on skills assessment for open-door systems is rarely fluid or uncontroversial. Those concerned with academic standards argue that under-prepared students need to be identified and directed toward developmental courses. Students, they hold, can expect academic success only when they bring to the class-

room proficiencies in basic skills that facilitate mastery of college level material.

Others counter that such student screening will become analogous to the 1960s remedial catch-all programs that eroded self concepts, tracked students and "cooled them out." (Clark, 1960:1980) The suspicion of literacy testing centers on the perpetuation of inequality. The open door philosophy implies that students should not be denied access to courses they wish to take.

For some, the controversy is resolved by recognizing that the academic mission of the community college requires educational intervention. This means that testing students permits us to arm them with the best possible academic plan. As the chair of the Association of American Community and Junior Colleges Board of Directors summarizes:

> "We have an obligation to differentiate based on ability. It is not totally unlikely that our important commitment to access can be appropriately mediated by academic standards designed for increasing the likelihood of student success. We are not necessarily eliminating access through educational intervention. This intervention can take the form of open admission to our colleges and data-based entry to individual courses and programs. But there is a tendency to view this as a tainted activity at variance with community college social responsibility. It is time to sanction this effort." (Eaton,1984:55)

Other researchers have also argued that students must be screened to determine whether they possess the necessary skills for collegiate study. (Roueche,1981; Herrscher, 1977)

Most community colleges today are involved in some type of skills measurement. Thus, to test or not has become a moot issue. More pertinent queries for educators reverberate around the kinds of decisions made from test data. Does student placement, based on test performance, create a "revolving door"? Are the tests used to equip students with the skills they have missed in earlier educational experiences but will need for college success? I will review the reading skills assessment programs at three institutions, Southern, Western and County, in trying to answer these questions. A statistically comparative analysis is inhibited by the absence of long term data and the embryonic state of the reading skills program at Southern.

Southern

Southern, a community college located in Virginia, created the Committee to Study Reading Skills during the 1983-84 academic year. Representatives from the three academic divisions, counseling, admissions and records, the learning resources center and continuing education developed recommendations for a testing and reading program that was implemented in the fall of 1984.

The recommendations considered the potential impact of the program on personnel, facilities and dollars. The institution's concern about its access function led to a proposal that recommended rather than required skills assessment for

students.

The committee evaluated test data on 683 students in the 1983-84 academic year. Students reading levels were compared to their grade point averages.

The results demonstrated serious reading deficiencies among the students sampled. Students reading abilities ranged from below 7th to above 14th grade level. The reading test data revealed a 10th grade mode. Forty percent of the subjects read at 9th grade and below.

Academic success was observed to increase as the reading level of the student increased. Academic success was defined as a 50 percent chance of a GPA at 2.5 or above. Students reading at or above the 12th grade level demonstrated the best chance at academic success. The committee determined that students reading below 12th grade level would have difficulty with college work. This cut-level paralleled the 48th percentile and below on the Nelson-Denny Reading Tests.

Some caution was used in interpreting the data due to questions about the representativeness of the sample (Ss included developmental English students). The Nelson-Denny Reading Test is used as a preliminary diagnostic. Additional diagnostic steps are pursued by faculty after placement into either the remedial reading improvement course or the for-credit critical reading and study skills course.

The Reading Test is administered and scored by testing personnel. Students are referred to an English faculty member

or a counselor for placement advice.

The Reading Test is currently recommended for students registering for any 100 level English course and for all students on probation. Those students scoring below the 9th grade level are strongly encouraged to register for remedial English 008. Students may concurrently register for college level credit courses (except English and Math, where a placement test is also required).

Reading Test policies are available in print from Admissions and Records, faculty advisors, counselors, division administrators and the Dean of Students.

Western

Western, a county college in New Jersey, began its remediation program in the fall of 1978. Initially the cut scores reflected practical considerations in staffing capacity to handle the students in need of skills assessment and of how the students actually fare in the classroom. Recently the state and Western mutually agreed upon a standard cut-score in keeping with the Basic Skills Council recommendation.

Testing scores are used to identify students in need of reading remediation. Students needing extensive remediation (six hours required) are differentiated from those needing slight remediation (three hours required). Students are unrestricted in the first level college courses that they may take while gaining reading proficiency. However, Western

advises those needing remediation to take no more than twelve credit hours while developing their basic skills.

All students are tested before registering for courses. Western uses the New Jersey Basic Skills Placement Test (NJBSPT). Students are notified within a week if no remediation is needed. Those needing to take all or part of the bi-level reading program are notified somewhat later while the appropriate tier assignment is considered.

Full-time students must satisfy reading requirements within 24 semester hours. At the 24th credit students are not permitted to enroll in subsequent semesters for college level courses until remediation is completed. Part-time students are given four semesters to complete their remediation requirements.

County

County, a New Jersey community college, finds that approximately 40% of all entering students need to improve reading skills. Testing is done prior to registration. Roughly 99% of all students are tested at entry and 93% of those needing remediation are actually placed in the two-tiered reading program.

The Degrees of Reading Power Test is used in conjunction with the Reading Comprehension section of the NJCBSPT to determine reading placement. Students are assigned to either a lower level remedial (lacks proficiency) group or

an upper level developmental (lacks proficiency in certain areas) group. The remedial group contains students with below 9th grade equivalency cut scores. The developmental group is comprised of students with cut score equivalencies between 9th and 11th grade reading level. The reading placement cut-scores are based on skills required for entry level college courses. These skills have been specified for each course at County.

Students may take a limited number of college level courses while they attain reading proficiency. These courses include typing, contemporary society, foreign languages, concepts of physical education, math (by placement), drafting, principles of construction, visual arts and performing arts.

County students must begin required remediation in their first semester. Full-time students are given a year to satisfy skills course obligations. Part-time students must meet their obligation within the first 30 credit hours of enrollment. Insufficient progress in the first semester limits a student to 13 credits in the next semester. Inadequate performance in the second semester results in a nine credit ceiling on enrollment in the subsequent semester. Insufficient progress in the third semester results in academic dismissal. Both full and part-time students are subject to these requirements regradless of their curriculum or remedial status.

County's educational intervention strategy combines pre-testing with post-testing. Pre-tests are used to establish entry level abilities and determine placement. Post-tests serve to supplement evaluation data and ensure consistency of application to exit standards.

Students may proceed to the next level or to college level courses by satisfying course requirements and demonstrating proficiency on the exit examination. Exit from lower level reading requires 9th grade proficiency. Exit from upper level reading requires an 11th grade equivalency as measured by the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and Informal Reading Inventory. Once exit criteria are met students are provisionally accepted into college level courses. However, the number of credit hours a student takes is very closely monitored by County.

An on-line master tracking tape stores NJCBSPT scores, placement results and indices of academic performance. This permits enforcement of testing, placement and enrollment policies and longitudinal tracking and evaluation of the assessment-placement program.

Conclusions

Reading Skills assessments at Southern are recommended. For students who accept diagnostic/placement recommendations skills upgrading may be achieved. Funding concerns, at this

time reduce the support of a more comprehensive assessment program. The institution does indicate an interest in entry level evaluation of all students. When this is possible Southern may wish to explore a bi-level placement program, exit controls to aid in validating placement decisions, completion rates, retention data by placement decision, and the effects of concurrent enrollment in college level courses on students needing remediation. For the moment, the limited policy of placement testing may indeed be, as the committee has expressed, "more responsible than a policy of benign neglect." (SCCRR,1984)

The two New Jersey colleges, in comparison to Southern reflect a more comprehensive use of assessment instruments. County, in particular, maximizes its use of placement testing to facilitate student success. Both County and Western lend support to Eaton's (1984) comment--colleges continue to provide open access to higher education while improving student skills.

The New Jersey Basic Skills Council's recently released report of its study of New Jersey Colleges and Community Colleges seems buoyed by the retention and academic success resulting from skills assessment and placement programs. They report high retention rates, credit ratios, GPAs and survival success when Western and County's remediation-com-

pleted groups are compared to their remediation-not completed groups. The Council report (1985) notes, for instance, that all County students passing the remedial course in reading (73%) also attain minimum competency on the reading post test (100%). Too, students who complete remediation survive in the college at a higher rate than those not needing remediation and at a much higher rate than those who did not complete remediation.

Admittedly the report finds some unexpected phenomena that complicates an understanding of the relationship between assessment, skills programs and student success. At Western, one-half of the remediation-not-completed group attained a GPA of 2.0 or better. Too, low percentages of the remediation completed reading group reached minimum competency but performed as well as the non-remediated group. At County, need completing reading groups and the need-not-completing reading groups are not strikingly different in GPA and credits earned to credits attempted. (NJBSC,1985) While such results pose questions for assessment based placement programs, the data at least assuage concerns over testing as the death knell to the community college's open door.

The overall patterns at County and Western give support to the argument that skills assessment is necessary and purposeful in catapulting the open door philosophy into student survival and success. Toward this end, assessment programs should consider the following in their design:

- a specification of the skills required in college level courses;
- testing instruments that will accurately and incrementally measure these skills;
- a remedial curriculum staffed by faculty committed to developing these skills;
- clearly stipulated performance goals and completion time frames set and monitored for the students;
- post-evaluations to determine when exit proficiency has been achieved;
- close and regular interaction between students identified as being in need of remediation and their faculty, advisors and counselors;
- financial support for administrative/faculty personnel, facilities and monitoring systems for the program.

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